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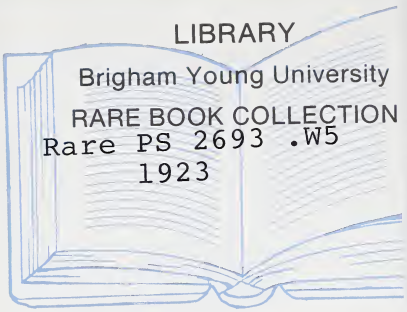

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WILD CHERRY

WILD CHERRY

BY

LIZETTE WOODWORTH REESE

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To

Mrs. Lawrence Turnbull

Dear Friend

DEDICATION

READ these few songs, so few indeed,
They will in no wise fill
Aught but a space by that tall flower
Set on your window sill;

The white azalea, that you love,
As virginal a thing,
As though it lay in a silver wind
Warm at the heart of spring.

If, in the goodness of your heart,
A moment, or for long,
You cannot tell which fairer is—
The better for the song!

THE thanks of the author are due to the publishers of the Literary Review, The Bookman, Smart Set, Ainslie's Magazine, Vigilantes, The Nation, Contemporary Verse, The Lyric, The Baltimore Sun, and the Charleston Year Book for permission to include in this collection the poems which first appeared in their publications.

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WILD CHERRY

WILD CHERRY

WHY make your lodging here in this spent lane,
Where but an old man, with his sheep each day,
Twice through the forgotten grass, goes by your way,
Half sees you there, and not once looks again?
For you are of the very ribs of spring,
And should have many lovers, who have none.
In silver cloaks, in hushed troops down the sun
Should they draw near, oh strange and lovely thing!
Beauty has no set weather, no sure place;
Her careful pageantries are here as there,
With nothing lost. And soon, some lad may start—
A strayed Mayer in this unremembered space—
At your tall white, and know you very fair,
And run, and run, to roof within your heart.

FOG

WHAT grave has cracked and let this frail thing out,
To press its poor face to the window-pane;
Or, head hidden in frayed cloak, to drift about
The mallow bush, then out to the wet lane?
Long-closeted scents across the drippings break,
Of violet petunias blowing there,
A shred of mint, mixed with whatever ache
Old springs have left behind wedged tight in air.
Small, aged things peer in, ready to slip
Into the chairs, and watch and stare apace;
The house has loosened from its grasp of yore
Dark-hoarded tales. Were I, finger on lip,
To climb the stair, might I not find the place
Turned all to huddled shape, white on the floor?

SPRING ECSTASY

OH, let me run and hide,
Let me run straight to God;
The weather is so mad with white
From sky down to the clod!

If but one thing were so,
Lilac, or thorn out there,
It would not be, indeed,
So hard to bear.

The weather has gone mad with white;
The cloud, the highway touch;
White lilac is enough;
White thorn too much!

FAREWELL

ALWAYS I shall remember this—
A field close to a road, and high
With yarrow, slate-white, bitter thing.
There was no sound from sky to sky,

But that of your slow foot to town,
Treading the white herbs to the ground.
I shall remember everywhere
That smell of yarrow all around.

I shall remember it too well,
As I have done the half of life;
My skirts are full of it, my hands;
It hacks at me as with a knife.

WHITE FLAGS

NOW since they plucked them for your grave,
And left the garden bare
As a great house of candlelight,
Oh, nothing else so fair!

I knew before that they were white,
In April by a wall,
A dozen or more. That people died
I did not know at all.

THE YOUNG GHOSTS

TO old Verona, any dusk in spring,
Up the dim, twisted road comes Juliet,
Her haunted orchard close remembering.
Some silver weather, when the panes are wet,
Small Arthur drifts back to his mother's knee,
Where she sits weeping, London April-mad
Below her, and her ladies, two and three,
Sighing about her, tall, and palely sad.
Oh, the young ghosts, in the young year come back,
To Newburyport, to York, and Norfolk town,
To Springfield, Berkeley, little country Ware!
Some old house calls them, high above the wrack,
Packed with their lost springtime, their new renown—
To keep away were more than they could bear!

A PURITAN LADY

WILD Carthage held her, Rome,
Sidon. She stared to tears
Tall, golden Helen, wearying
Behind the Trojan spears.

Towered Antwerp knew her well;
She wore her quiet gown
In some hushed house in Oxford grass,
Or lane in Salem town.

Humble and high in one,
Cool, certain, different,
She lasts; scarce saint, yet half a child,
As hard, as innocent.

What grave, long afternoons,
What caged airs round her blown,
Stripped her of humor, left her bare
As cloud, or wayside stone?

Made her as clear a thing,
In this slack world as plain
As a white flower on a grave,
Or sleet sharp at a pane?

TO LOVE

TAKE me, and break me, Love;
Make me into a thing
More memorable than a star,
Or a tall flower in spring.

If this you will not do,
Down to oblivion thrust;
Into a sleek, forgotten grave,
Crumble me to dust!

A GIRL'S MOOD

I love a prayer-book;
I love a thorn-tree
That blows in the grass
As white as can be.

I love an old house
Set down in the sun,
And the windy old roads
That thereabout run.

I love blue, thin frocks;
Green stones one and all;
A sky full of stars,
A rose at the fall.

A lover I love;
Oh, had I but one,
I would give him all these,
Myself, and the sun!

REMEMBRANCE

LET all the towns remember you,
And tell it out with mellow tongue,
Down April yards at fall of dew—
That you were fair, that you were young.

A wind at dusk shaken to and fro
Against a melon-colored pane;
White flags in a brief, wistful row;
An only star after a rain.

But let this secret keep unsung;
Nor wise nor fool must it divine,
And tell it out with April tongue—
That all this loveliness was mine!

A PORTRAIT

BEHIND the plaintive weather of your smile,
What crumbling Aprils, what frayed tumults lie,
You, that are gone from us a many a while,
Beyond the fall of leaf, or change of sky?
What phantom thing went by your half-lit pane,
Some long since dusk, and in the going wept
Its ended loveliness? In the pale rain,
The tall house shook, and ever after kept
The look of tears. A dream indeed may pass,
And love be bitter-brief. From dreams cut free—
That love is fleet as flower white or blue
Unpetaled down a yard of village grass,
You knew. I know, and break the heart in me.
Count me the years till I shall smile like you!

THE SPOUTS

I HEARD the spouts begin to cry
As I came over the hill;
How could they know the poignant thing
That I had kept so still?

Like to the gold in a king's house,
Like to that gold there shone
Seven wet small windows, and as one
Stared me down to the bone.

And there was not in all the world
A place for me to hide
From the hurt music of that cry:
Oh, if I had but died!

GHOST NIGHT

A HUNDRED strange things
Looked in at the door;
There went a soft foot
Across the old floor.

Oh, lovely and lost,
It was you who were there,
Wrapped round in the cloak
Of your golden long hair!

The house grew as sweet
As a just-lit flower,
On the edge of the rain,
In an April hour.

Wrapped round in the cloak
Of your golden long hair,
Oh, lovely and lost,
It was you who were there!

I fell at your feet;
Enough you were near,
Although but a ghost
With the ghosts of the year!

DEAD MEN

I STOOP and pluck the tansy's gold,
Stacked in the gusts along my lane;
A shadowy hand plucks there with me;
Some dead man claims his own again.

Not anything is wholly mine,
Platter, or book, or stretch of clod;
The hurt in the dusk's tumbling red;
Or even the texture of my God.

And when the wind limps by my sill,
And heaps the village dust, and goes,
Whose phantom cloak is left behind,
Or whose great ship, or long-gone rose?

THE ROMAN ROAD

(England)

AS he went down the Roman Road
In March or thereabout,
A slender, wild, unbroken gold,
The daffodils were out.

Sudden along the Roman Road
He saw the wind come down,
Behind the golden daffodils,
And drive them into town.

A moment. Yet almost it seemed—
That moment was of old;
A company of spears went by,
All Roman, and all gold.

WAGES

"PAY me my wages, Grief;
Pay, and be done with me."
"I gave you ears to hear;
I gave you eyes to see.

"More music has the wind
Than you can ever hold;
A dogwood flower is white
Laburnum stormy gold."

"Pay me my broken house,
My twelvemonth bare of him."
"With melting memories
I packed them to the brim.

"You need but crook your hand,
And he is at your side,
More loving and more loved
Than if he had not died!"

CHANGED ENGLAND

(1921)

AS one, who comes back to a house of yore,
Some high old house in legendary trees,
And misses blue flower here; there, at the door,
Notes thinning bush, a difference in the bees;
Then enters, halts, and of a sudden knows
A face gone out, a step lost on the stair,
So I, in England. Every buffet shows
Upon her cheek; her every bone lies bare.
Yet comes not still the bloom to urban bough?
Yet pluck not girls the country thorn and sigh?
Folks buy, and sow, and neighbors go about?
Oh, different! Oh, more worth loving now,
Spent loveliness, that hurts me like a cry;—
The step lost on the stair, the face gone out!

HOLIDAY

SOME dusk within a silver wood,
A narrow wood of the wild pear,
A hundred trees in a windy rood,
I shall be tall, I shall be fair.

Wild pear will strew me foot and head
With white, like samite wrought of old
For troubled women lying dead
In falling towns, curious with gold.

The pools will show me my changed face,
With all its April back again,
A silver thing in a silver place
And yet unsung by singing men.

At dusk, it will be very good
To have not any tears to weep;
At last, within a wild pear wood,
To turn to silence and to sleep.

THRIFT

TO fast from wines, silks, anything,
Will spread you feasts indeed;
Still you possess the spring,
And still
The little, wealthy daffodil.

To choose and keep the straitened way,
You serve, not without wage,
Your God, your race, your day;
You hold
Fast in your hand the ghostly gold.

EMILY

SHE had a garden full of herbs,
And many another pleasant thing,
Like pink round asters in the fall,
Blue flags, white flags a week in spring.

Housewives ran in each hour or so,
For sprigs of thyme, mint, parsley too;
For pans to borrow, or some meal;
She was the kindest thing they knew.

Tall, and half slender, slightly grey,
With gay, thin lips, eyes flower-clear,
She bragged her stock was Puritan;
Her usual mood was Cavalier.

Ample of deed; clipped, warm of speech,
Each day in some large-flowered gown,
She went the rounds to sad, to sick
Saint, humorist to the faded town.

She died at sixty. For a while
They missed her in each intimate spot—
Tall, and half slender, slightly grey—
They ate, drank, slept, and quite forgot.

THE YOUNG BEAUTY

MY two old neighbours come along the lane
Tucking their sober skirts up from the grass;—
"To see her you see April in a glass;
She is the quince bough blowing at your pane."
From village houses in a windy line;—
"The folk in church have scarce the wit to pray;
Her looks drift in between each word they say.—"
But ah, I know a lovelier face was mine!
Beauty indeed is but the flower of quince;—
(And who so well as I should know this thing?)
Blown out of mind as out the white tree nigh,
And down the dusty levels of Long Since.
Blown out of mind. There is no second spring;—
For ah, I know a lovelier face had I!

THE CHANGE

ONCE I forgot all, everything,
In any day of fall or spring;
And even when I went to bed,
The little prayer I should have said.

I cannot now forget at all
Anything of spring or fall;—
The splutter of wind within a hedge;
Or smell of hyssop from the edge
Of a hot field; the field itself
Dry as a bone upon a shelf;
Or deer that fleet across a wood;
Or an old woman in a hood.

My prayers rise up, each like a spear,
So sharp that God cannot but hear.

AN AUTUMN DAY

BEAUTY goes sadly on a day like this;
She cannot find a rose in any lane;
The haw upon the thorn seems all amiss
For what was white, and very April-plain.
Here are the long-packed secrecies of yore;
And the pale glimmer of a dead man's clothes;
And withered things blown up and down at door;
And here the old disaster of the rose.
Yet she is still herself, though different,
With a hushed foot upon her errands set;
And with a spare hand, shakes the ancient mood
Of music out a hedge, or some lost scent
From the wrecked grass, or in the silver wet
Strews with her violets a crumbling wood.

A CAROL

MARY the Mother
Sang to her Son,
In a Bethlehem shed
When the light was done.

"Jesus, Jesus,
Little son, sleep;
The tall Kings are gone,
The lads with the sheep.

Jesus, Jesus,
My bosom is warm;
And Joseph and I
Will keep You from harm."

Mary the Mother
Sang to her Son,
In Bethlehem town
When the light was done.

EARLY DUSK

SEE, how the little things begin to go,
Housekeeping frets, and talk, and marketings,
And noises in the road. For this hour brings
The eventual hush that weathers know.
And now once more I see, with the old sight,
The blue of larkspur crumpled at the door;
The pears fallen in the grass; yonder a score
Of upper windows in a small, soft light.
The yard's length near, a neighbor, pulling free
Her brier-white sheets from line, I dimly hear.
And now the careful house, grown starry-clear,
Draws back, leaves me to what shall ever be,
Punctual to their old company with me—
My ache-in-heart, my Joy of yester-year!

CHANGELESS

THREE sycamores down the road,
High, blotched, shaken in the cold;
A field; cut in its grass,
A pool, like small, wild gold.

And this was all I saw,
As you came by with me
A day last week. Now you are dead.
What is it that I see?

Three sycamores down the road,
High, blotched, shaken in the cold;
A field; cut in its grass,
A pool, like small, wild gold.

THE PORTRAIT OF A FLORENTINE LADY

KINGS' wares; and dreams; and April dusks;
  Out in the golden dew,
One sighing in a secret lane;—
  These wrought the look of you.

God made you out of lonely things;
  To set you at our door,
He tumbled down into the dark
  A hundred towns or more.

OLD LETTERS

"THE wind blew down the old thorn that
you know;"
"She wore an apple-colored silk last night;"
"The baby grows each day a sweeter sight;"
"He has been dead a week; we miss him so;"—
These are the words that leap up in the air,
As rainy young sounds leap up in the spring,
At first of dusk, the sky a great soft thing;
Though it be April, yet we feel so bare.
Gusts, frocks, and a long grave wedged in between!—
Old houses, like to music at the fall,
Held these dim folk who drift here up and down:
She was a beauty, she in apple green.
I tell you that the happiest one of all
Was that dead man they missed so in the town.

OUR COMMON HOARD

I SAY: "She is not here, for she is dead,"
And crunch that word between my teeth, to know
The taste of it. I say: "For she is dead."
Out in the street I feel that it is so;
But when I houseward turn, I quite forget,
For some slight village talk I think to share
Within that room in deserted April set;—
Sudden her vacant shawl upon a chair!
And she is dead! This will not serve at all.
That still we share, as each with each, is plain,
This dusk, that star, the stir of that tall tree—
The purple of that flower by the wall,
Our wistful part of weathers come again.
Since loveliness is left, then so is she!

OLD ELI

DOWN came old Eli through the wind,
Roaring, as loud as he had mind,
A battered song of Zion's sward,
Of seven candles of the Lord.

Behind their panes the listening folk
Saw him go by with flaring cloak,
Across a world of sad, thick gold,
A figure separate, magic, bold.

It seemed he strode across the land
With seven candles in his hand,
Into the wind his bellowing thrust
South, north, like some wild other gust.

The pools splashed gold upon the grass;
The pear-trees dripped with Hallowmas;
The glittering windows were a-blare
As though with trumpets down the air.

Old Eli's dust, and Huntingdon!
Yet down the year's end, set of sun,
Seven candles lighting him before,
He bellows, bellows as of yore!

THE POPLARS

I HEARD the poplars of Saint John's
Letting their small notes go,
Like silver dropping through a sieve,
Down to the graves below.

The rector had that moment died;
His house stood there apart,
A look about it as though one
Had struck it to the heart.

The shepherd of a straggling flock,
Quick-spoken, easy, sound,
No truer man had ever lived
In the old country round.

I heard the poplars of Saint John's
Making such music there,
As it were silver worn to thread
Dropped down a silver air.

I counted them. Now he was dead,
Sudden they came to sight.
I counted five trees to the left,
And four trees to the right.

IN VAIN

OH, for a world empty of you,
Quite bare of anything,
With any likeness to the old,
For wild remembering!

A world so wholly different,
I would be different too,
And read, or mend, or plant the bulbs,
Without a thought of you.

But this can never be at all;
Some small thing thereabout
Would bring that same hurt back again,
And tear my wild heart out.

Perhaps the smell of yarrow flowers,
Of yarrow flowers set
In a lost field. White yarrow flowers,
Out in the August wet.

TWELFTH NIGHT

THREE wild kings come to the town,
Riding with one mind;
Scarlet, cinnamon, stormy blue,
Stream their cloaks behind.

Call the wild kings through the night,
Standing each at door;
"Open. There is here a gift,
Kept for you of yore."

"Here is gold," saith the wild king,
He the blue-clad one;
"Here is frankincense," saith he,
All in cinnamon.

Saith the king in scarlet cloak,
Standing there at door;
"Here is myrrh, a bitter thing,
Kept for you of yore."

MARCH WIND

BLOW! blow, and tear Orion down;
Topple his great hounds out the sky;
And I shall wear about the town,
A cloak of silver bye and bye.

Set your wild trumpet to the dust,
And crack the old graves. High or low
Upset the world, if so you must,
To start one village rose to blow.

Tug at men's hearts. As with a knife
From every vain thing cut them free;
And break the littleness of life
As one breaks fagot on the knee.

Blow! blow my lover a strange dream;
Pierce his old thought of me in twain;
Make me so fair to him, I seem
A new Helen, down new Trojan lane.

THIS VERY HOUR

MASTER, this very hour,
Under this village sky,
Between two thieves You go,
To die.

About our separate work,
Ever we come and pass;
One Pilate; Andrew one;
One scarlet Caiaphas.

Peter stoops to his bulbs,
Under a kitchen pane;
And James halts there to talk
Of day's luck, field or rain.

Along some brambly wall,
Where orange haws burn hot,
His thirty coins held fast,
Goes dark Iscariot.

THE KISS

HEAP slumber on your eyes;
Stop your mouth with dust;
Be all that you were not,
As dead folk must.

Be all that you were not,
Unmindful, cold, apart—
The kiss you gave that dusk
Tears at your heart!

A GIRL

TOO strange, too far a thing to hold,
Our fingers slip, and let you go;—
A white, long flower high on a cliff,
With peril of the sea below.

We cannot match you as you are,
With aught or all within our reach;
Match shadows on an April pool?
Or moonlight rendered into speech?

You herd the stars up in the sky,
In silver smock, with a tall rod,
And to your arms, as shepherds do,
Gather the little lambs of God.

MIRACLE

WHO is in love with loveliness,
Need not shake with cold;
For he may tear a star in two,
And frock himself in gold.

Who holds her first within his heart,
In certain favor goes;
If his roof tumbles, he may find
Harbor in a rose.

THE WIDOW

THE road is left; the yard;
And the old sycamore;
Larkspurs tall in the grass
Just at the door;

And the thick gusty wind that breaks
The clothes-props down;
She has a bed to make; for her tall girl
A buff-sprigged gown.

But oh, to have him back again
Flashing and young;
To sit in yonder chair,
And with delicate tongue

To talk to her of love,
And things that last—
Go call him from his grave
Where he lies fast!

IMOGEN GEORGE

SHE was of Herrick's golden kind,
Clear Devon to the end;
Each trick of jest was in her blood
And hers to save or spend.

So gay a thing! Now low in dust
The loveliness of her;
In lane, in house, her laughter yet
Makes a frail, tender stir.

Hers were the very quips of spring;
And often we looked about,
To see, if somewhere, all at once,
A cherry-tree were out.

With Herrick of the daffodils,
With them of old renown,
She wanders in a happier place
Than Devon, or this town.

SILENCE

MY seven lovers are come back;
They stand about my gilded bed:
One says: "Of mirths she had no lack;"
One says: "Now all her griefs are sped."

I lie there a white apricot bough
The rain has tumbled to the grass,
That folk will lift in a moment now
Out of the cumbered road, and pass.

One of the seven stands alone,
His stark blue cloak like a gust behind;
He stares down at me as at stone,
With not a word of any kind.

BRAMBLES AND DUSK

TURN me to fagot, dusk,
To heap your fire!
Oh, tear me through and through,
White daggers of the brier!

I may not keep you long;
Before I go,
Oh, fill me full of you;
I shall not miss you so!

HER DEAD SON

GOD gives so much; He gives in great and small;
Our mothers, and the pool cupped in the grass;
Lovers, the young moon pricking through the glass;
We are not worth it; we give scarce at all.
God gave my son; right well do I know now
I was not worth him, nor was worth of yore
My mother, the bright water at the door;
The lad's height was a planet, mine a bough.
My slow heart turns this matter to and fro:
I was not worth the lad; let his due be
That I outclimb his star; I were a clod
Not to be less but more, at last to grow
Into the loveliness he was to me,
And being worth him, of some poor worth to God.

A BELL IN THE WIND

THE sun goes out, and leaves
To the young dusk a cry,
The cry of one who grieves
And is like to die.

There the old houses stand
Down the sunken road;
It clutches them like hand
At throat; it drives like goad.

Along the salmon dusk
A hundred hurts of life;
Around and through it all,
The smell of the wild musk
Is sharp as any knife.

THE DAFFODILS OF OLD SAINT PAUL'S

CALL delicately through the town;
"Let April have its will;
Oh run; oh, run to Old Saint Paul's
And buy a daffodil!

A rosy vicar saw their kind
Three hundred years ago,
And thrust them on a Devon shelf
Where they are still in blow.

Could Herrick come to Old Saint Paul's
With our tall flowers so gay,
He would not have the heart indeed
To tear himself away.

The hawker sets them on the curb
Like candles thereabout;
Oh, buy your one; oh, buy your two,
Before they splutter out!"

THE SPIRIT'S RIDDLE

COMES one: "Here is a tower."
Comes one: "A sack of gold."
The third holds out a sprig of brier,
Just plucked from the young mould.

Now, shall I take the tower?—
So strange a thing Life goes—
The gold all bursting out the sack?
Or shall I take the rose?

UPB

THE SPRIG OF THORN

"SIRS, is this not a poor thing,"
Loud cried I up and down,
"I plucked from an old, straggly tree
Half way to Bethlehem town?

Oh, shepherd, let me have of you
A lamb from out your fold!
Oh, king, take from your bursting chests,
A handful of your gold!"

"Now more than all my huddled flock,"
The old wise shepherd cried,
"Your sprig of thorn; now more indeed
Than my good fold beside."

The king came down from his tall throne:
"His red cloak made a flare:
Hold fast that bloom from Bethlehem Road,
I have no gold so rare."

I ran straight to the Lamb of God;
I gave my flower so white;
His mother saw it was of thorn,
And wept through half the night.

LONG DEAD

SO much I had of you, yet not enough;
Some vague of loveliness you kept from me,
Some trick of April laughter, some grey stuff
Of grief, woven of lost sun and a lost sea.
I crooked my hand to reach you—you were gone!
And I was left as one without a wall—
Behind which white quince shows its veils of lawn—
A wayfarer, your lover not at all.
But now, I know you even as I am known;
Your foot makes stir of music in the air;
I pluck a wayside flower; upon mine own
Your fingers clasp; its small blue pomp we share;
And when life cumbers, and the hard tears start,
It is enough to run, straight to your heart!

BEFORE THE LOOK OF YOU

I FEAR you, Loveliness;
Before the look of you,
Your far yet intimate face,
My song crumbles in two.

Less am I than a tower;
Or a pool's thin, wrecked gold;
Or great bells loose at dusk;
Or a shepherd and a fold;

Or a few violets—
That straggle April-clear,
Within a tumbled wood
At ending of the year.

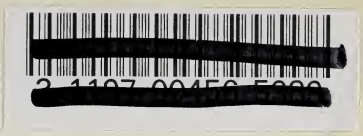
Yet spend me at your will;
Yet spend me low and high,
Though I am naught at all;
For if you go, I die!

ALIEN

SHE was a wild plum flower,
As fair as that fair thing;
A breathless blowing hers,
As it were the last spring.

Not anything to her
A spire with stars for fold;
A rose though but the one;
Or a sack full of gold.

We could not make her care
For sheep bells coming home;
For yarrow in a field;
For gilded frock or comb.

Once, like a wild plum flower,
She strewed her leaves to night,
All her white loneliness
In a moment gone from sight.

Timeless she lasts, but where
We have not yet found out;
But not in any town
Or any house about.